**James Mercer Langston Hughes**, (February 1, 1902 – May 22, 1967) was an [American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) [poet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poet), [novelist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novel), [playwright](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Playwright), [short story](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story) writer, and [columnist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columnist). He was one of the earliest innovators of the new literary art form [jazz poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_poetry). Hughes is best-known for his work during the [Harlem Renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance). He is also best known for what he wrote about the [Harlem Renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance), "Harlem was in vogue."

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Langston_Hughes&action=edit&section=1)**] Biography**

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Langston_Hughes&action=edit&section=2)**] Ancestry and childhood**

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Langston_Hughes_1902.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Langston_Hughes_1902.jpg)

Langston Hughes in 1902

Langston Hughes was born in [Joplin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joplin,_Missouri), [Missouri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missouri), the second child of school teacher Carrie (Caroline) Mercer Langston and her husband James Nathaniel Hughes (1871-1934). Both parents were mixed-race, and Langston Hughes was of [African American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American), [European American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_American) and [Native American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States) descent. He grew up in a series of Midwestern small towns.[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-scholar-0) Both his paternal great-grandmothers were African American, and both his paternal great-grandfathers were white: one of [Scottish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_people) and one of [Jewish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish) descent.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-1)

Hughes was named after both his father and his great-uncle, [John Mercer Langston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Mercer_Langston) who, in 1888, became the first black to be elected to the [United States Congress](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Congress) from [Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia). Hughes' maternal grandmother Mary Patterson was of African American, French, English and Native American descent. One of the first women to attend [Oberlin College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oberlin_College), she first married [Lewis Sheridan Leary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Sheridan_Leary), also of mixed race. He joined the men in [John Brown's Raid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Brown%27s_Raid) on [Harper's Ferry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harper%27s_Ferry) in 1859 and died from his wounds.

In 1869 Mary Patterson Leary married again, into the elite, politically active Langston family. Her second husband was [Charles Henry Langston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Henry_Langston), of African American, Native American, and Euro-American ancestry.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-kshs.org-2)[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-3) He and his younger brother [John Mercer Langston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Mercer_Langston) worked for the abolitionist cause and helped lead the [Ohio Anti-Slavery Society](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=938) in 1858.

Charles Langston later moved to Kansas where he was active as an educator and activist for voting and rights for African Americans.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-kshs.org-2) Charles and Mary's daughter Caroline Mercer Langston was the mother of Langston Hughes.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-4)

Hughes' father left his family and later divorced Carrie. He went to [Cuba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba), and then [Mexico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexico), seeking to escape the enduring racism in the United States.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-5) After the separation of his parents, while his mother travelled seeking employment, young Langston was raised mainly by his maternal grandmother Mary Patterson Langston in Lawrence, Kansas. Through the black American [oral tradition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_tradition) and drawing from the activist experiences of her generation, Mary Langston instilled in the young Langston Hughes a lasting sense of racial pride.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-6)[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-7)[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-8) He spent most of childhood in [Lawrence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lawrence,_Kansas), [Kansas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kansas). After the death of his grandmother, he went to live with family friends, James and Mary Reed, for two years. Because of the unstable early life, his childhood was not an entirely happy one, but it was one that heavily influenced the poet he would become. Later, Hughes lived again with his mother Carrie in [Lincoln](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln,_Illinois), [Illinois](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illinois), who had remarried when he was still an adolescent, and eventually in [Cleveland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleveland,_Ohio), [Ohio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ohio), where he attended [high school](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_school). The Hughes' home in Cleveland was sold in foreclosure in 2009; the 2.5-story, wood-frame house on the city's east side was sold at a sheriff's auction in February for $16,667.

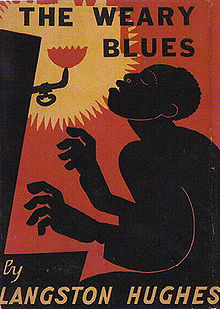
While in [grammar school](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grammar_school) in Lincoln, Illinois, Hughes was elected class poet. Hughes stated in retrospect he thought it was because of the [stereotype](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotype) that African Americans have rhythm.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-9) "I was a victim of a stereotype. There were only two of us Negro kids in the whole class and our English teacher was always stressing the importance of rhythm in poetry. Well, everyone knows — except us — that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet."[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-10) During high school in Cleveland, Ohio, he wrote for the school newspaper, edited the [yearbook](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yearbook), and began to write his first short stories, poetry, and dramatic plays. His first piece of [jazz poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_poetry), "'When Sue Wears Red", was written while he was still in high school. It was during this time that he discovered his love of books. From this early period in his life, Hughes would cite as influences on his poetry the American poets [Paul Laurence Dunbar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Laurence_Dunbar) and [Carl Sandburg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Sandburg).

### [[edit](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Langston_Hughes&action=edit&section=5)] Death

On May 22, 1967, Langston Hughes died from complications after abdominal surgery, related to [prostate cancer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prostate_cancer), at the age of 65. His ashes are interred beneath a floor medallion in the middle of the foyer leading to the auditorium named for him within the [Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Schomburg_Center_for_Research_in_Black_Culture) in Harlem.[[30]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-29) The design on the floor covering his [cremated](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cremation) remains is an [African](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Africa) [cosmogram](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmogram) titled *Rivers*. The title is taken from the poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by Hughes. Within the center of the cosmogram and precisely above the ashes of Hughes are the words *My soul has grown deep like the rivers*.

The Langston Hughes Memorial Library on the campus of [Lincoln University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_University_(Pennsylvania)), as well as at the [James Weldon Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Weldon_Johnson) Collection within the [Yale University](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yale_University) [Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beinecke_Rare_Book_and_Manuscript_Library).

**[**[**edit**](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Langston_Hughes&action=edit&section=7)**] 1920s**

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Weary_Blues_1926.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Weary_Blues_1926.jpg)

Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*, 1926

First published in [*The Crisis*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Crisis) in 1921, the verse that would become Hughes' signature poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", appeared in his first book of poetry *The Weary Blues* in 1926:[[31]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes" \l "cite_note-30)

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the

flow of human blood in human veins.

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers*.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I danced in the Nile when I was old

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy

bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers*.

Hughes' life and work were enormously influential during the [Harlem Renaissance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance) of the 1920s alongside those of his contemporaries, [Zora Neale Hurston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora_Neale_Hurston), [Wallace Thurman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wallace_Thurman), [Claude McKay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_McKay), [Countee Cullen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Countee_Cullen), [Richard Bruce Nugent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Bruce_Nugent), and [Aaron Douglas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_Douglas), who, collectively (with the exception of McKay), created the short-lived magazine *Fire!! Devoted to Younger Negro Artists*.

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fauset,Hughes,_Hurston_1927.jpg)

[http://bits.wikimedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fauset,Hughes,_Hurston_1927.jpg)

[Jessie Redmon Fauset](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessie_Redmon_Fauset), Hughes, and [Zora Neale Hurston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora_Neale_Hurston), 1927, [Tuskegee Institute](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuskegee_Institute)

Hughes and his contemporaries were often in conflict with the goals and aspirations of the black [middle class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_class), and of those considered to be the midwives of the Harlem Renaissance, [W. E. B. Du Bois](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._E._B._Du_Bois), [Jessie Redmon Fauset](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessie_Redmon_Fauset), and [Alain LeRoy Locke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alain_LeRoy_Locke), whom they accused of being overly fulsome in accommodating and assimilating [Eurocentric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurocentrism) values and culture for [social equality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_equality). A primary expression of this conflict was the former's depiction of the "low-life", that is, the real lives of blacks in the lower social-economic strata and the superficial divisions and prejudices based on skin color within the black community.[[32]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-31) Hughes wrote what would be considered the [manifesto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesto) for him and his contemporaries published in [The Nation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Nation) in 1926, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*:

The younger Negro artists who create now intend to express

our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.

If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not,

it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too.

The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people

are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure

doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow,

strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain

free within ourselves.

Hughes was unashamedly black at a time when blackness was démodé, and he didn’t go much beyond the themes of *black is beautiful* as he explored the black human condition in a variety of depths.[[33]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-32) His main concern was the uplift of his people, of whom he judged himself the adequate appreciator, and whose strengths, resiliency, courage, and humor he wanted to record as part of the general American experience.[[34]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-Brooks-33)[[35]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-34) Thus, his [poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry) and [fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiction) centered generally on insightful views of the working class lives of blacks in America, lives he portrayed as full of struggle, joy, laughter, and music. Permeating his work is pride in the [African American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_American) identity and its diverse culture. "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind,"[[36]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-35) Hughes is quoted as saying. Therefore, in his work he confronted [racial stereotypes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethnic_stereotype), protested social conditions, and expanded African America’s image of itself; a “people’s poet” who sought to reeducate both audience and artist by lifting the theory of the black [aesthetic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesthetics) into reality.[[37]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-36) An expression of this is the poem *My People*:[[38]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes#cite_note-37)

* *The Weary Blues*, Knopf, 1926
* *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Knopf, 1927
* *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*, 1931
* *Dear Lovely Death*, 1931
* *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Knopf, 1932
* *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play*, Golden Stair Press, N.Y., 1932
* [*Let America Be America Again*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Let_America_Be_America_Again), 1938
* *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Knopf, 1942
* *Freedom's Plow*, 1943
* *Fields of Wonder*, Knopf, 1947
* *One-Way Ticket*, 1949
* *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Holt, 1951
* *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1958